

House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer, D-Md., and 46 co-sponsors are pushing a bill that would increase the amount of money the federal government pays toward employee health insurance premiums.

The legislation would increase the government's responsibility for Federal Employee Health Care Benefit Plan premiums from 72 percent to 80 percent. The bill is similar to legislation Hoyer sponsored in the last two congressional sessions.

"Federal employees need relief from the rising costs of health care," Hoyer said. "This legislation will help them afford quality health care, even as costs continue to skyrocket."

Hoyer's office noted that FEHBP premiums have been increasing dramatically over the past several years. Premiums rose 10.6 percent in 2004, and the Office of Personnel Management said last year that premiums will rise 7.9 percent in 2005.

"The government must be able to attract and retain quality employees," Hoyer said. "This bill will help make the government more competitive in the marketplace for employees."

Mad About Pay

Three senior Democrats have protested a new Defense Department practice of awarding higher raises to political appointees over Senior Executive Service employees. According to the letter, SES members are eligible to earn 2 percent raises but political appointees are able to receive 2.5 percent.

The letter was signed by Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., and Rep. Danny Davis, D-Ill. All three are high-ranking members of committees that oversee the federal workforce.

"Nowhere did Congress state that an agency could base SES pay on an employee's status as a

political appointee," the letter said. The lawmakers said that SES pay can be determined by skills, qualifications, competencies, responsibilities or agency performance.

"According to DoD, political SES employees merit higher raises because they occupy the most senior positions in the government," the congressmen wrote. "Even if federal law allowed this to be a factor to be considered in setting pay raises - and it does not - we question whether this statement is even true."

The lawmakers asked defense personnel officials to provide a complete explanation of the policy and to forward relevant internal documents.